

CASE STUDY

Education Improvement Branch
Research Centre
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School improvement is a continuous and highly contextualised process, with every Queensland state school at different stages of their improvement journey. The Education Improvement Branch produces case studies to showcase schools that are making significant gains in their journey, and identify factors that contributed to their success.



Building positive relationships for learning at Ayr State High School

Positive relationships are at the heart of Ayr State High School's improvement journey. For students, relationship building begins before day one with support for their transition into high school, and continues with a strong focus on engagement and wellbeing throughout their schooling. Among staff, relationships are focused on building capability within a culture of collaboration and trust. The leadership team at Ayr State High School highlights the positive relationships among students and staff. In the words of the principal, 'we are the Ayr High family'.

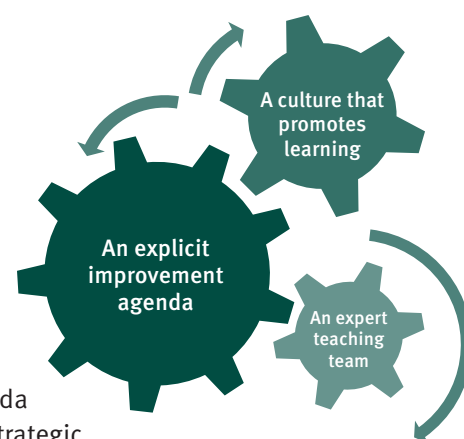
Background

Ayr State High School is located in the small rural town of Ayr in Northern Queensland. The school was established in 1937 and currently educates more than 500 students from Years 7 to 12. Ayr State High School's improvement journey has seen significant change in how the school operates to lift student outcomes.

The school's improvement journey gained momentum five years ago, following its 2015 school review. The review was an opportunity to receive feedback and improvement strategies to support further improvement in student learning outcomes.

The school's first step was to sharpen its explicit improvement agenda. Led by the leadership team, staff collaboratively unpacked school data to identify gaps in student learning and support for wellbeing. Following this, time was scheduled to share the findings with staff, set clear targets, and discuss possible next steps and

initiatives. Using the 2015 review recommendations and the *National School Improvement Tool*, staff refined the improvement agenda to focus on three strategic priorities: student engagement, student learning and school leadership. The improvement mantra for all staff became 'SUCCESS: every student, every day', acknowledging that success for every student is an individualised pursuit.



'As a team, we felt inspired.'

Principal

Student engagement

Ayr State High School is building and maintaining a culture of high expectations and positive learning outcomes for all students. The school started by strengthening their transition program with their 12 feeder schools. The program begins in Year 5 and includes whole-day experiences, multiple orientation days, and the opportunity to participate in school events and clubs such as musicals and the STEM club. The school also organises for Year 7 students to engage with their old primary schools to meet and share stories with transitioning students. From day one, students know their teachers, classes, the environment and the Ayr High Way — they're already part of the family. The transition program also enables teachers to meet and share student data that can be used to consider targeted support options for students before the school year begins. Support for students continues into senior schooling. From the beginning of Year 10, all senior students are allocated a senior school staff mentor who walks alongside the student and their family to support their engagement with, and completion of, the senior phase of learning.

The school encourages attendance and student engagement through innovative support programs and creative incentives tailored to student needs. Yarning circles led by Indigenous Elders occur with families to discuss student attendance, achievement and wellbeing. A dedicated student support team runs

responsive and proactive prevention programs, such as Rock and Water, Tunnel and Light and Shine Girls, that focus on developing the social and emotional skills of students. The Queensland Former Origin Greats (FOGS) ARTIE Academy Driver Licencing Program encourages attendance, offering eligible students five free driving lessons if they are consistently reaching their attendance targets. This program is run in partnership with the RACQ and not only lifts senior attendance, but also enables students to be job ready post-graduation.



As part of the school's Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) practices, staff and students co-developed an acknowledgement system that sees Hawk Points awarded to those who are doing their personal best in following school expectations about learning, attendance and appropriate behaviours in and out of the classroom. All students contribute to the achievement of school-wide point targets and collectively share in school celebrations.

Student learning

Following its 2015 review, Ayr State High School made a collaborative decision to further develop as a learning-focused school that puts students at the centre. The leadership team implemented Martin Skelton's Looking for Learning model, as well as a comprehensive student wellbeing program.

The Looking for Learning model encourages students to provide feedback to teachers so they can reflect on their teaching and ensure that the intended learning is taking place. The leadership team engaged in a series of professional learning workshops to ensure they had a deep understanding of this approach. A small group of teachers participated in action research, using scheduled time to collaboratively unpack the model and tailor it to the needs of the school. It didn't take long before the school saw positive results. The model was then shared with all teaching staff prior to whole-school implementation. Regular opportunities for observation, coaching and feedback were subsequently scheduled to guide teachers and provide in the moment support.

The school invests in student wellbeing and support as a deliberate strategy for improving student achievement. The school has implemented The Learning Curve Wellbeing Program across all year levels, teaching students how to develop their cognitive skills and social-emotional resilience, as well as identify and grow their strengths. The program is integrated into the school timetable to ensure that all students receive at least one hour of wellbeing learning each week. To support this, staff are also provided with wellbeing training as part of their professional development. Not only does this enhance staff wellbeing, but it also supports teachers to deliver lessons and support students. As the principal reflects: 'That's what families do.'

'Students need to be happy and healthy to learn.'

School leader

School leadership

As part of the school's improvement journey, the principal seeks to attract, develop and retain a team that is united and committed to supporting student learning. Following feedback from teaching staff in 2015, the principal focused on building the capability of all staff and generating a culture of mutual support and trust.

Ayr State High School has a comprehensive six-month induction program for new and beginning teachers. This includes being paired up with a buddy to help navigate the nuances of the school, and being allocated a mentor to support professional learning. All teachers participate in observation, coaching and feedback, visiting each other's classrooms on a regular basis. This process is accompanied by a coaching and mentoring handbook that clearly outlines the purpose, expectations and protocols of visiting other classrooms. This handbook helps to build confidence as teachers know what to expect and they trust the process. Staff capability development is also facilitated through networking opportunities including intentional collaboration sessions, regular morning teas,

and end of term breakfasts where teachers can speak to colleagues to share ideas, classroom practices and expertise.

The school's *Class act communication charter* was developed collaboratively with all staff and outlines expectations for communication within the community including respectful, calm and courteous interactions. It was developed and implemented by the leadership team as a deliberate step towards fostering positive relationships among staff, parents/carers and the community. To support this, the staff collaboratively developed a charter that clearly outlines strategies for working with each other in a meaningful way. The *Class act* has helped develop trust in the school community, and produces a safe environment for all members to contribute and participate. Although the process is now considered second nature by staff, student free days are used to periodically review and update the charter as needed.



Outcomes

Since its improvement journey began, Ayr State High School has experienced success after success. An increase in student engagement has boosted Year 7 and Year 10 attendance rates. The school has seen an overall lift in students' academic achievement, with a growing proportion achieving a C or above across learning areas in all years. In particular, they have demonstrated a significant upward trend in mathematics.

A recent survey highlighted the school's positive results in supporting engagement and wellbeing. The 2021 School Opinion Survey (SOS) confirms that students feel encouraged in their learning. The SOS reflects the school's efforts in building and retaining a united teaching team that works together in a positive environment. This year, almost 100 per cent of surveyed staff agreed that the school has an inclusive culture where diversity is valued and respected. These factors have contributed to the community's positive perception of the school, resulting in increased enrolments over recent years.



'In the end, we are a family.'

Principal



Success factors

- Precise strategic leadership.
- Staff collaboration.
- Culture of engagement and high expectations.
- Strong focus on wellbeing.
- Deep belief that every student can succeed.
- Positive relationships among staff and students.

To generate discussion

- How does our school continue to develop and drive an explicit improvement agenda with clarity and precision to maximise outcomes?
- How is our school regularly unpacking student data to identify learning gaps and inform next steps against clear success measures?
- What approaches support student wellbeing in our school? How do we evaluate their impact?
- How can we attract, develop and retain our expert teaching team?

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